DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 195 CG 029 287

AUTHOR Raffaelli, M.; Koller, S. H.; Reppold, C.; Kuschick, M.; Krum, F.; Bandeira, D.; Simoes, C.

TITLE Gender Differences in the Family Situation of Brazilian Street Youth.

PUB DATE 1999-04-00

NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Albuquerque, NM, April 15-18, 1999).

CONTRACT 97/0075.0

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Adjustment (to Environment); *Adolescents; *Children; *Family Environment; Foreign Countries; Homeless People; *Runaways; *Sex Differences

IDENTIFIERS *Brazil (Porto Alegre)

ABSTRACT

The goal of this analysis was to examine gender differences in the experiences of children and adolescents found on city streets. It has been proposed that girls who leave home to seek their survival on city streets are from more disturbed families than boys, reflecting cultural factors that result in differential norms for male and female behavior. Although boys and girls may share the common condition of being "on the streets," they may be on distinct developmental trajectories, with girls more likely to exhibit stress than boys. The current analysis examined whether male and female street youth living in a large Brazilian city differ in their family situation and in their adjustment to the street. Some family variables differed for females and males in ways predicted by the cultural hypothesis. However, examination of current functioning did not support the view that girls are more distressed than boys on the street. Furthermore, boys and girls did not differ dramatically on most variables measured in this study, suggesting that their experiences have much in common. (Contains five tables.) (MKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 430 195

Presented at Society for Research on Child Development, Albuquerque, NM, April, 1999

Gender differences in the family situation of Brazilian street youth

M. Raffaelli[1], S.H. Koller,[2] C. Reppold,[2] M. Kuschick,[2]

F. Krum,[2] D. Bandeira[2] & C. Simões[1]

[1] University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA

[2] Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brasil

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by grants to Silvia H. Koller and to students at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul from CNPq, FAPERGS (grant No. 97/0075.0), PET/CAPES, PROPESQ/UFRGS; and by grants to Marcela Raffaelli from the University of Nebraska Research Council, Institute for Ethnic Studies, and Office on International Affairs. Address correspondence to Marcela Raffaelli, Department of Psychology & Institute for Ethnic Studies, 238 Burnett Hall, University of Nebraska, Lincoln NE 68588-0308. E-mail: mraffaelli1@unl.edu.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M RAFFAELLI

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CG029287

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

The goal of this analysis was to examine gender differences in the experiences of children and adolescents found on city streets. It has been proposed that girls who leave home to seek their survival on city streets are from more disturbed families than boys, reflecting cultural factors that result in differential norms for male and female behavior. In this view, the presence of boys on the street may reflect a deliberate survival strategy by impoverished families who socialize sons into early independence. In contrast, the presence of girls on the street is thought to reflect family dysfunction, as in most cultures girls are traditionally kept within the home. Thus, although boys and girls may share the common condition of being "on the streets" they may be on distinct developmental trajectories, with girls being more likely to exhibit distress than boys. Little empirical research has been conducted to examine whether gender differences in the experiences of street girls and boys support this cultural hypothesis. Therefore, the current analysis examined whether male and female street youth living in a large Brazilian city differ in their family situation and in their adjustment to the street. Some family variables differed for males and females in ways predicted by the cultural hypothesis. For example, there was a tendency for more girls to say they left home because of conflict or abuse, and girls were more likely than boys to report negative relationships with their mother and father. However, examination of current functioning did not support the view that girls are more distressed than boys on the street. Furthermore, boys and girls did not differ dramatically on most variables measured in this study, suggesting that their experiences have much in common. Additional research on this topic is urgently needed. Future research should include mental health assessments, involve a larger sample of participants, and follow youngsters longitudinally to examine long-term adjustment to the street setting.

BACKGROUND

The United Nations defines a street youth as "any boy or girl ... for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults." Despite inclusion of girls in this definition, most youth found on the street and included in research studies are in fact male. Attempts to work with female street youth are hampered by lack of knowledge about differences between girls and boys on the street.

It has been proposed that girls who leave home are from more disturbed families than boys, reflecting cultural factors that result in differential norms for male and female behavior. In this view, the presence of boys on the street may reflect a deliberate survival strategy by impoverished families who socialize sons into early independence. In contrast, the presence of girls on the street is thought to reflect family dysfunction, as in most cultures girls are traditionally kept within the home. Thus, although boys and girls may share the common condition of being "on the streets" they may be on distinct developmental trajectories, with girls being more likely to exhibit distress than boys.

Little empirical research has been conducted to examine whether gender differences in the experiences of street girls and boys support this cultural hypothesis. The current analysis had two main goals. The first was to examine whether male and female street youth differ in their family situation, and the second was to examine whether boys and girls show different adjustment to the street.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Table 1 displays characteristics of the study sample. The study was conducted in Porto Alegre, a mid-sized city (population 1.5 million) in southern Brazil. Following procedures approved by Institutional Review Boards at the co-Investigators' home universities, interviewers approached potential respondents in institutional settings (e.g., shelters, open houses providing meals and recreational activities), explained the study, and invited them to participate in a two-part interview.

The first part of the interview consisted of a sentence completion task, and the second part of a semi-structured interview.

Measures

Sentence Completion Task. Participants completed the Sentence Completion Task for Street Children and Adolescents, developed by the authors for the current study. The measure includes 24 items assessing different domains (e.g., street life, family, future expectations). This analysis focuses on nine stems dealing with different aspects of family life. Inductively-derived content coding schemes were developed for responses to each sentence stem. Responses were classified by two independent coders and discrepancies were resolved by discussion.

Semi-structured interview. The interview included questions dealing with family experiences (e.g., family precursors to leaving home, current family relations) and current functioning on the street (e.g., survival activities, support networks).

RESULTS

Family situation and relationships

Reasons for leaving home. The most common reason for leaving home was to escape conflict or abuse (Table 2). Although the difference was not significant, more girls than boys said they left because of conflict. Only five youngsters said that death in the family was a precipitant for leaving home. Additional analyses (not shown) revealed that the majority of the sample (69.7%) had two living parents; 3 (4.5%) had lost both parents, 3 (4.5%) their mother, and 14 (21.2%) their father.

Current family contact. No significant gender differences emerged, although more girls said their families had news of them, and more girls had gone home in the last month (bottom half of Table 2).

Subjective aspects of family relations. Close-to-significant gender differences were found in responses to two of the sentence stems dealing with parents (responses to the third stem,"I think my father/mother," were similar to "My father/mother and I," and are not presented). More boys than girls reported positive, and fewer negative, parental relationships (Table 3). In terms of what was wished for with each parent, gender differences emerged for fathers but not mothers. Over

two thirds of girls wished their father would change in some way (most commonly in how he treated the respondent or other family members). In contrast, nearly a third of boys said they wished their father was alive or with them, and 16% said they wished their father had a better life (a wish was not expressed by any of the girls). No gender differences emerged in responses to the three sentence stems dealing with family (Table 4).

Functioning in the street environment

Gender differences in youngsters' sleeping locations, ability to meet survival needs, and social networks were examined (Table 5). No significant gender differences in sleeping location emerged, but more girls said they slept in institutions, and fewer slept on the street. In terms of meeting survival needs, several gender differences emerged. For example, boys were more likely to have experienced police violence and to earn money by begging. Furthermore, although the differences were not significant, more of the boys said they went hungry and stole to survive. Finally, looking at social networks, the majority of both boys and girls said they had someone to help them and nearly two thirds were attending school.

DISCUSSION

Scholars have proposed that male and female children and adolescents on the street may experience differential developmental trajectories that reflect cultural norms regarding gender-appropriate behavior. The goal of this analysis was to assess the cultural hypothesis by exploring gender differences in a sample of homeless Brazilian adolescents, focusing in particular on their family situation and in their ability to meet basic needs on the street. The main findings were:

- Some family variables differed for males and females in ways predicted by the cultural hypothesis. For example, there was a tendency for more girls to say they left home because of conflict or abuse, and girls were more likely than boys to report negative relationships with their mother and father. These findings provide support for the view that to overcome cultural resistance to girls leaving home, the family situation must be more negative.
- Contrary to the cultural hypothesis, findings did not support the view that girls are more distressed than boys on the street. The pattern of gender differences in current functioning

suggests that some girls may even be better off than boys, perhaps because they are better able to access institutional support and avoid negative attention from the police and other authorities.

- Boys and girls did not differ dramatically on most variables measured in this study, suggesting that their experiences have much in common.

Additional research on this topic is urgently needed. Future research should include mental health assessments, involve a larger sample of participants, and follow youngsters longitudinally to examine long-term adjustment to the street setting

Table 1.

Sample description

	GIRLS (n = 33)	BOYS (n=33)	All (n=66)
Age			
Mean (SD)	14.6 (1.8)	14.3 (1.9)	14.5 (1.9)
Range	11-18	10-17	10-18
Race			
White	39%	27%	33%
Black	42%	42%	42%
Mixed	18%	30%	24%
Where family from			
POA (study city)	79%	70%	74%
Interior of state	18%	24%	21%
Another state	3%	6%	5%

Table 2.

Gender differences in family situation (% responding "yes" to each variable)

	Girls (n=33)	Boys (n=33)	All (n=66)
Reasons for leaving home [a]			
Abuse	24.4	18.2	21.1
Conflict	51.5	36.4	43.9
Freedom	18.2	15.2	16.7
Death in the family	6.1	9.1	7.6
Poverty	3.0	9.1	6.1
Current family relations			
Family members same city	87.5	81.3	84.4
Family has news of child	72.4	48.3 *	60.3
Visited home last month	66.7	51.5	59.1
Ever sleep at family home	18.2	21.2	15.9

[a] Categories are not exclusive. Only categories with at least 8 respondents are shown. Significant gender differences (chi-square with continuity correction): * $p < .10$.

Table 3.

Responses to sentence stems about parents (% giving each response)

	"My father and I ..."		"My mother and I..."	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Positive relationship	38.7	64.5	48.4	67.9
Negative relationship	35.5	12.9	48.4	25.0
Life events/changes	6.5	9.7	0	7.1
Dead/unknown	19.4	12.9	3.2	0
	χ^2=5.87, df=3, p<.12		χ^2=6.24, df=3, p<.10	

	"I wish my father ..."		"I wish my mother ..."	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Change/be different	68.8	43.8	58.1	51.7
Were alive/with me	21.9	31.3	16.1	17.2
Better life	0	15.6	22.6	20.7
Negative or no wish	9.4	9.4	3.2	10.3
	χ^2=7.31, df=3, p<.06		χ^2=1.28, df=3, n.s.	

Table 4. Responses to sentence stems about family

	Girls (n=33)	Boys (n=33)	All (n=66)
"My family treats me..."			
Neutral	10.0	20.0	15.0
Positive	30.0	36.7	33.3
Mixed	10.0	3.3	6.7
Negative	46.7	33.3	40.0
No contact	3.3	6.7	5.0
"When I was little, my family ..."			
Positive aspects/treatment	36.6	46.9	42.0
Negative aspects/treatment	20.0	15.6	17.7
Was united/better	30.0	25.0	27.5
Other	13.3	12.5	12.8
"I wish my family ..."			
Was united/together	42.4	42.0	42.2
Was different	48.5	51.6	50.0
Other	9.0	6.5	7.9

Table 5. Gender differences in functioning on the street (% "yes")

	Girls (n=33)	Boys (n=33)	All (n=66)
Sleeping location(s) [a]			
Institution	63.6	48.5	56.1
Street	30.3	51.5	40.9
Home	18.2	21.2	19.7
Survival needs			
Feel safe where sleep	75.0	75.0	75.0
Go hungry	42.4	60.6	51.5
Experience police violence	21.2	60.6 ***	40.9
Steal to survive	9.1	21.2	15.2
Beg to get money	15.2	39.4 **	27.3
Work to earn money	36.4	42.4	39.4
Social networks			
Someone who helps	75.8	72.7	74.2
Current school	63.6	60.6	62.1
Receive money from family	24.2	18.2	21.2

[a] Categories not mutually exclusive. Significant gender differences: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.